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Afghan War: In Year Seven, a Deadly Stalemate

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 17 — With the Afghan war now in its seventh year, and with serious fighting having ebbed for the winter, neither side appears any closer to winning than they were when Soviet troops joined the fray in December 1979, military experts say.

Military Analysis

The situation is difficult to assess because few qualified, independent observers are permitted into Afghanistan. But despite the uncertainty over details, patterns and trends suggest that the outcome will be in doubt for some time to come.

The war has been costly to the Soviet Union — its forces have reportedly suffered 30,000 casualties — and analysts say the Russians would like to get out of "their Vietnam."

There is no easy way out, however, that does not imply a Soviet defeat, a repudiation of the Brezhnev doctrine or the abandonment of the Soviet-installed Afghan Government under Najib. That doctrine, formulated at the time of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, holds that the Soviet Union cannot allow a Communist regime on its borders to be overthrown.

Russians Not Seen Leaving

"If the Americans were fighting the war," an expert on the Soviet Union said, "they would be losing."

He said American frustration with the inconclusiveness of the war would have created domestic pressures to abandon the effort, something that is not the case in the Soviet Union.

So, despite the assessment of the Soviet leader, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, that the Afghan war is a "bleeding wound," and the recent offer of a cease-fire and a phased Soviet withdrawal, it is not likely that the Russians will call it quits in Afghanistan anytime soon.

What is likely for the coming year, according to experts, is that the Soviet Union will seek to improve the military situation with the current force of 115,000 soldiers. Intelligence sources say they do not believe the Russians are willing to commit more troops.

At the same time, the experts say, the Moscow leadership will seek an acceptable political formula that will leave a friendly Afghanistan on the Soviet Union's southern border. According to one Afghan specialist, "The Russians know they can't win militarily, so they are looking for a creative political solution."

Unclear on Who Is Ahead

Much American intelligence on the war is based on satellite photographs and radio interceptions. Although this results in accurate, quantifiable intelligence on such things as numbers of tanks and troops, it provides little in the way of insight.

In the absence of firsthand information, American experts differ on which side has the upper hand. The State Department and the Pentagon are generally optimistic over battlefield prospects for the guerrillas, as long as arms and supplies continue to flow to them by way of Pakistan. Many intelligence analysts, however, are divided in their opinions, as are outside experts on Afghanistan.

The 120,000 Afghan guerrilla fighters have suffered heavy losses since the war began in the summer of 1979, with armed insurrection against a new leftist Government. The guerrillas have seen portions of their homeland devastated by the fighting.

The Afghan insurgents have demonstrated traditional skill in guerrilla warfare and have shown a limited ability to carry the war to the Soviet-occupied cities. But to date, the guerrillas do not pose a serious threat to the Soviet occupation. Nor have the guerrillas shown more than a marginal will-

ingness to put aside tribal differences and cooperate with one another against the Russians and the Kabul Government.



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Soviet strategy seems to be to secure the major Afghan cities, connected by the so-called Ring Road.

Soviet Morale Low

Military experts agree that the performance of the Soviet Army has been generally poor throughout the war, with the exception of special units. Its allied Afghan Army of approximately 30,000 has been known more for desertions than for effectiveness, according to most experts.

Soviet troop morale is reported to be low, and drugs have become a problem. Poor sanitation and hygiene in the field have resulted in a high incidence of sickness such as hepatitis. Even Soviet air supremacy, the Russian strong suit in the war, is being trumped by the insurgents now that they have received hand-held American Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.

About 150 of the heat-seeking missiles were delivered to the guerrillas last year and there are reports that

additional ones will be sent soon. According to a Defense Department source, the mujahedeen, as the guerrillas are known, have been quick to learn how to operate the weapon and have had a 70 percent success rate against Soviet planes and helicopters. The source also indicated that morale among Soviet helicopter pilots has become a problem since the appearance of the Stinger on the battlefield.

To avoid embarrassment to Pakistan, United States officials are reluctant to say much about the flow of American military aid that goes to the guerrillas by way of Pakistan. It has been reliably reported, however, that in addition to providing Stingers, the Central Intelligence Agency finances the purchase of Chinese-made arms, which are shipped to the guerrillas through Pakistan.

Sources say that the combination of United States-supplied weapons and those captured from the Russians and the Afghan Army has solved the weapons shortage experienced by the resistance in the early days of the war.

Throughout the last six years, the Russians and the Afghan Army have experimented with strategies and tactics in search of a successful military antidote to the guerrillas. To date they do not appear to have found it.

Large-Scale Operations

At the outset, the Russians tried to leave fighting to the Afghan Army and

Continued

restricted use of Soviet forces to small-scale forays against the guerrillas. When it became clear that the Afghan Army was no match for the guerrillas and that desertion by Government troops was widespread, the Soviet Army became more actively involved.

There followed large-scale operations and the deliberate destruction of villages and crops, and officers planned combined offensives that made heavy use of bombers, tanks and artillery. But the Russians soon realized that this tactic, suitable for the plains of Central Europe, would not work in mountainous Afghanistan. The guerrillas merely melted into the hills in the face of superior Soviet firepower.

Thereafter, the Russians tried helicopter-borne attacks with regular army units. Special units known as "spetsnaz" were brought in to employ counter guerrilla tactics, and Soviet attack aircraft were introduced to harry the guerrillas and their supply lines from Pakistan.

Each shift in Soviet tactics met with some initial success, but the guerrillas quickly came up with countertactics to frustrate the Russians.

Success, but Not Victory

As successful as the guerrillas have been in defending themselves, however, this cannot be viewed as victory. The guerrillas have hurt the Russians, but they have not defeated them.

To date, guerrilla successes have been of three types. They have frequently ambushed Soviet and Government forces. These include ambushes of Soviet aircraft and helicopters that are lured into valleys only to come under insurgent fire from heavy machine guns and missiles.

The guerrillas have also been successful in disrupting Soviet supply lines. In a land of few roads, most of which wind through the mountains, the guerrillas have trapped and destroyed many supply trucks. In the eastern part of the country, the Russians can safely move down the roads only in convoys heavily supported by aircraft and helicopters providing covering fire.

The most dramatic and visible guerrilla successes have been in the form of rocket attacks on Government-controlled cities, airfields and supply depots. The Russians have established defensive positions around the most important targets, but the guerrillas still manage to avoid the defenses to launch rockets against targets in Kabul and other heavily defended areas.

New Soviet Strategy

But for all their tactical successes, the guerrillas have failed to come up with a strategy that will lead to military victory. Unless they do, military experts say, the initiative remains with the Russians, and six years of experience may allow them to develop a tolerable and potentially successful long-term strategy.

Evidence of a new and possibly workable Soviet strategy began to emerge last year. The goal of the strategy seems to be to safeguard the major cities in Afghanistan and the routes that connect them with the flow of supplies from the Soviet Union. Offensive operations may be restricted to local pacification efforts around the cities and attacks against guerrilla supply efforts from Pakistan.

The cities to be put under firm Government control are connected by a road that forms a circle around the country and is called the Ring Road by some American military analysts. The cities include Kabul, Ghazni and Jalalabad in the mountainous east; Kunduz and Mazar-i-Sharif, north of the Hindu Kush mountains; Herat, Shindand and Farah to the desert west, and Kandahar in the south.

Control of these cities and the surrounding territory would put much of

the population under Government domination. To do this, informed sources say, semiautonomous commands have been established in zones around the country.

Zone Commander's Role

The zone commander is a local Afghan of proven ability, who is assisted by Russian advisers. Each zone commander is in a population center and has at his disposal a variety of Afghan units to include the army, the secret police, tribal militias and special light units of Pushtoon warriors called Sarandoy. The militia and the Sarandoy are said to be of better fighting quality than the army.

In addition, the zones contain Soviet light battalions made up of airborne troops trained for motorized or helicopter operations. Each zone commander is responsible for the pacification of his region with the units assigned and can call upon Kabul for additional forces and air support.

The rest of the Soviet and Afghan forces remain under the control of higher headquarters. These are available for other operations like the reinforcement of zones and for the protection of supply lines, airfields, depots and convoys.

With this strategy, the Russians are apparently settling in for a methodical pacification of the populated areas. Military analysts say they believe that top priority is being given to the Kabul region and the area north of the Hindu Kush, astride the three major Soviet supply routes into Afghanistan.

In addition to military pacification efforts, the Russians have also undertaken political, economic and psychological programs to try to convert the Afghans under their control into loyal supporters of the Kabul Government. If they succeed over time, military experts say, the guerrillas will be reduced to a mere nuisance.